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Jerry Tarkanian and Bill Musselman

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
March 3, 1997

The calendar says March. Time for March Madness. The Big Dance. The Road to the Final Four. The Road to Big Dollars from Big TV revenues. The Road to Commercialism and Compromise. The Road to Corruption.

Before we get too caught up in the CBS snow job on intercollegiate basketball, the reverence and piety with which major college coaches are interviewed, the sanctimonious profiles of student athletes, and even before the really excellent basketball, and the pure joy and excitement of the competition during this month of single elimination basketball, let us pause and remember what all this costs at too many institutions.

In recent weeks two of the more interesting coaches in NCAA history have been in the news. Jerry Tarkanian who is now the coach at Fresno State University and Bill Musselman who is now the head coach at the University of South Alabama were back on the sports pages where their methods were once again under scrutiny. Note please that once again they are both head basketball coaches at Division I basketball programs, which raises the question of just what you would need to do to get yourself permanently eliminated from the college coaching ranks, or to make yourself such a pariah that no one would ever hire you.

The Jerry Tarkanian story enters a new phase at Fresno State. Jerry has hired a former player, Roscoe Pondexter, to serve as what an assistant athletic director at Fresno describes as "a moral compass and role model for the student-athletes."

While being recruited by Tarkanian at Long Beach State, Pondexter, according to NCAA investigators, had another student take the school entrance exam for him. More recently, just before being hired at Fresno, Pondexter resigned as a guard from the California prison system amidst charges that he had incited a riot between prison guards and had beaten prisoners. Is this Fresno State's idea of what constitutes a role model and a moral compass?

Tarkanian strongly defends his choice of Pondexter for the position at Fresno State, perhaps indicating what kind of people Tark thinks he has playing for him. The President of Fresno State Dr. John Welty, apparently only an innocent bystander at

his institution, pleaded ignorance when confronted with the NCAA evidence of academic fraud.

Tarkanian keeps getting hired and keeps leaving trails of NCAA violations wherever he goes. He gets hired because he wins. He wins because he gets the players, is a good coach, and has little regard for anything but winning.

Six weeks ago another name of another coach with a very unsavory track record surfaced. That is the one and only Bill Musselman, now head basketball coach at the University of South Alabama. Twenty-five years ago this season Musselman was in his first year as head coach at the University of Minnesota. In the middle of that season in a game at Williams Arena with the Gophers hosting Ohio State, one of the ugliest incidents in the history of college athletics took place.

It was a game between two unbeaten teams. With less than a minute to go Clyde Turner was called for a flagrant foul against Ohio State's Luke Witte. Corky Taylor offered his hand to help Witte up from the floor, but as he did so, he put his knee into Witte's groin. A bench clearing brawl followed involving both players and fans.

As a basketball coach Musselman has been heavily criticized for his win at all cost attitudes. One of his favorite slogans was, "defeat is worse than death, because you have to live with defeat." His teams were noted for their intensity, and his sideline manner was one of a man totally and completely obsessed. He calls it all "motivational technique."

Within two seasons Musselman had left the University of Minnesota to coach in the ABA, leaving a trail of 120 NCAA violations for Gopher authorities to ponder. He would return to Minnesota as the Timberwolves first coach, and would ultimately be fired there as he was just too intense for the professional game.

But he won and Tarkanian wins. So regardless of the trail of NCAA violations, regardless of the obsessive behavior or the record they leave behind, they will always find work. They will find work because there will always be a university president and athletic director somewhere who think it more important to win basketball games than to be overly concerned about rules, regulations, ethics or the academic integrity of their institutions.

That is the dark underside of March Madness, a form of madness you will not hear discussed at the Big Dance on CBS.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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